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Mental Health Could Be the Next Casualty of Global Warming

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Body

(Bloomberg) - One evening in July, Stephanie Felts was lying in bed trying to process simultaneous climate disasters all over the world. From a crushing Canadian heatwave to U.S. wildfires and China floods, the drumbeat triggered memories of a close call her family had with a raging inferno when they lived in Salt Lake City a few years ago.

"I just realized, OK, this is as good as it will ever be-not because we can't do anything to make things better, but because we just won't," said Felts, 43, who works in financial services and now lives near Atlanta. "It makes you feel like, 'hey, the apocalypse is starting.'"

She's not alone. More people are finding it hard to cope with a growing sense that governments and businesses won't do enough to slow global warming. To make matters worse, there's the knowledge that even if humanity suddenly unified in a historic shift to renewable energy, it's too late to avoid the grim consequences already baked in.

Perhaps not since the depths of the Cold War has such a profound, widespread despair for the future emerged. Whether one calls it climate anxiety, ecological grief or something else, deep concern about global warming is increasingly affecting many people's everyday life. A majority of U.S. adults already say they are somewhat or extremely anxious about the effect the climate crisis has on their mental health, a poll from the American Psychiatric Association found. That's on top of the stress of trying to protect against the coronavirus.

But while the pandemic may recede in the coming months or years, the atmospheric changes wrought by burning fossil fuels will remain for a long time to come. As this reality dawns on more people, mental health professionals all over the world find themselves racing to develop strategies to help them deal with the fallout, knowing it's a phenomenon that may someday affect almost everyone.

In the developing world, millions have been dealing with the psychological effects of global warming for years. Rising temperatures in Nigeria are contributing to desertification, forcing herders in the north to move south to feed their cattle. The shift has precipitated confrontations with crop farmers. Fear of violence over increasingly scarce resources is not uncommon.

Last October, Amuche Nnabueze's relatives learned that a stand of trees planted by her uncles had been cut down in a property dispute. "Now that you've cut the trees down, the animals that were living there are homeless," said Nnabueze, 50, a lecturer at the University of Nigeria in Nsukka. "The oxygen [the trees] were generating is no longer there."

The conflict is emblematic of how, thanks to climate change, large swaths of the African Sahel and savanna are expected to become the front lines of a competition for resources.

Mariana Menezes said she celebrated when the Paris Agreement was signed. Living near Porto Alegre in southern Brazil, Menezes said she "felt like we were going to manage to solve everything." But in 2017, when U.S. President Donald Trump announced he was going to withdraw from the pact, she was crestfallen. "I feel like I was naÃ¯ve, and sort of ill-informed," Menezes said. "I started getting really worried, thinking, 'oh no, we're not going to make it.'"

She started reading more about the crisis. The more she learned, the worse it got. "I became very anxious. I couldn't sleep," said Menezes, 44, a mother of three. "I was thinking about my children."

In Colombia, people are bracing for an increase in average temperature of as much as 0.9 degrees Celsius by 2040, which could reduce agricultural productivity in a coffee-growing country where more than 40% of the population is already poor. Luis Gilberto Murillo, Colombia's former environment minister, warns that the developing world already faces life-and-death choices tied to global warming.

"These communities' concern isn't necessarily that we're facing the great catastrophe of climate change, and that in 10 years they won't exist," he said. "These communities have no guarantee they'll still exist in two years."

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The sheer number of people across the globe susceptible to climate-induced stress has fostered a sense of urgency among mental health professionals seeking to understand the issue. Virtually anyone "could be affected by climate anxiety, regardless of their own personal vulnerability or relative safety," according to Susan Clayton, a psychology professor and researcher at The College of Wooster in Ohio.

Several studies have found a sizable minority saying the changing climate already affects their normal functioning. Seattle-based counselor Andrew Bryant said people are anxious about both global warming and being directly affected by a climate disaster. New York psychiatrist Janet Lewis said individuals are struggling with the everyday dissonance of daily activities-things they know are harmful, like eating red meat or driving a gas-burning car.

Lewis, who practices in upstate New York, used to get laughs from colleagues about her climate-related work when she began in 2015. Now there's increasing evidence that rising temperatures are associated with more violence, including suicide.

The Climate Psychiatry Alliance, of which Lewis is a member, is working with the Climate Psychology Alliance of North America to create training materials for mental health professionals. The American Psychological Association already has a course for practitioners, and Australian nonprofit Psychology for a Safe Climate has produced a professional development series. Other efforts around the globe are also in the works.

Among practitioners, a lack of awareness of climate-related mental health issues creates a risk of misunderstanding. If someone expresses trepidation about having kids because of the climate crisis, a professional not aware of the issue "might think of it as a defense against some deeper, more personal anxieties," said psychiatrist Elizabeth Haase.

Mental health experts emphasize that communicating with friends and family remains an effective way to cope-not everyone needs a therapist. Still, only 37% of Americans say they talk about global warming on a regular basis with people close to them, according to a survey from the Yale Program on Climate Change Communication.

Exploring the nature of the problem is key to finding ways to psychologically cope, according to Clayton. Climate change is real, so it's rational to be worried. It's in flux, so complete adaptation is impossible. And it's uncertain, so anxiety may be more likely than fear. Normally, Clayton said, it's possible to face a challenge in at least two ways: solve it or change your attitude towards it. But no one person can slow global warming or climate change, so a sense of powerlessness may take hold-spurring a retreat into denial.

But there's a third way, she said: finding purpose in the "struggle" to find solutions, from everyday behavior like recycling and buying sustainable food to advocacy. Lewis said people need to be "in touch with their own agency, their own ability to act and influence change rather than being shut down, overwhelmed or just retreating."

The idea of "re-earthing," or strengthening the connection between individuals and the planet, is gaining support as a way of both increasing environmental awareness and staving off despair, according to clinical psychologist Elizabeth Allured. Along similar lines, Portland, Oregon-based psychologist Thomas Doherty said he encourages people to explore their environmental identity. Though a relatively new concept, some broad classifications could include "egocentric" (inspired by personal benefit), "altruistic" (concern for others), or "Earth-based" (seeking to protect the natural world for its own sake). People often showcase a mix of these motivations, according to Doherty.

Different environmental identities lead some to try different paths-from working to save endangered species to securing access to clean water or reducing waste. Doherty has treated everyone from a teenager dealing with ***climate grief*** to a septuagenarian economist and environmentalist grappling with the sense of having "lost" the battle. He also offers courses for practitioners.

"If you don't really have any kind of environmental-identity basis, it's like an empty box that you're trying to put a heavy thing on," Doherty said. "It just collapses."

Rowan Ryrie, 39, discovered her climate identity after wondering for a long time how parents like her could organize around global warming issues. After attending a demonstration in Oxford, in the U.K., she chose to embark on a bigger environmental enterprise.

Eventually, she co-founded a global advocacy network called Parents for Future. Menezes in Brazil and Nnabueze in Nigeria steer national groups that are part of the organization. "I feel connected with parents all over the world who are trying to do the same climate work that I'm trying to do," Ryrie said. "That's really heartening. It gives me a lot of hope."

In Nigeria, Nnabueze, who is also an artist, makes sculptures out of litter and works to reclaim indigenous knowledge on waste management through skills such as basketweaving, a more sustainable alternative to plastic bags. Stephanie Felts in the U.S. writes open letters to her daughters, posting them to the Good Grief Network, a digital space to discuss distress over topics ranging from global warming to the coronavirus. She said sharing her thoughts with like-minded people can bring relief.

Then there's Sophia Kianni, a 19-year-old Iranian-American activist who founded a nonprofit that translates climate research into 100 languages, all while serving on a United Nations advisory group and attending college. Kianni came up with the idea for her nonprofit while visiting relatives in Iran, where pollution was so bad she could hardly see the stars at night. She realized climate information was only available in select languages, and so she started translating it from English into Farsi.

For Ryrie, advocacy can mean constructing protest signs with her daughters. Her 7-year-old has mastered the art of making placards featuring technicolor birds, even if she doesn't always spell "I love nature" right. Sometimes, headlines still rattle Ryrie, forcing her to take a step back.

"Facing climate breakdown while also thinking about your kids inevitably brings up some really hard feelings," she said. "I've realized that allowing space for emotions is important in this work."

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